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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: BARZANI'S CHIEF OF STAFF AND KRG PM ON
WHITE STATEMENT, WAY FORWARD

REF: BAGHDAD 64

Classified By: RRT Erbil Team Leader Andrew Snow for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is an RRT Erbil cable.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: The Ambassador,s Senior Advisor for Northern Iraq (SANI) discussed the December 7 White House statement, President Barzani,s upcoming visit to Washington, and the way forward with Dr. Fuad Hussein, President Barzani,s chief of staff on January 5, and separately with Dr. Barham Salih, KRG Prime Minister, on January 6. Fuad stressed the importance to the KRG of the White House,s public statement and was pleased with his own Washington meetings in December.

Fuad said the KRG had no objection to the U.S. seeing its long-term relationship with the KRG as part of its broader relationship with Iraq and does not see the U.S. expression of support as a commitment to oppose others; he sees it as a commitment to help find solutions and to try to understand the Kurds. Fuad said that Rowsch Shaways would replace Barham Salih as GOI DPM. Fuad probed for some sort of structured follow-up to the White House statement such as a joint committee. PM Salih also said the U.S. needed to reinvigorate the process and cautioned against emphasizing that the White House statement was "merely" a reaffirmation of existing policy. Fuad also expressed his hope at the possibility that the U.S. might sign a new security agreement once the new government is in place in Baghdad. End summary.

ELECTION LAW AND WHITE HOUSE STATEMENT

[1](#)3. (C) Both Fuad Hussein and Barham Salih emphasized the importance to the Kurds of the White House statement and phone calls. Fuad said that although there had been many private expressions of U.S. support for the Kurds this was the first such public statement. Given the Kurds, history, and the dangerous neighborhood in which they live, this public statement of support was extremely important. He told SANI about criticisms coming from the media, Arab Sunni politicians, and independent Kurdish politicians complaining that the statement either went too far in promising US assistance, or did not go far enough to guarantee U.S. backing of a referendum on article 140.

[1](#)4. (C) Fuad Hussein said that in negotiating the election law the KRG establishment had been in a bind. On the one hand if they did not compromise on the election law they realized that there would not be an election, but on the other hand they also knew that if they did accept the Kurdistan Region only getting 43 seats in the new Council of Representatives then the Kurdish people would not understand. The promise of the statement was what tipped President Barzani into instructing the Kurdistan Alliance to vote for passage of the law. SANI, noting the perception among some Kurds that the U.S. had exerted disproportionate pressure on the Kurds during the election law negotiations, said the U.S. had pressed all sides to be flexible and seek consensus on a

reasonable compromise.

15. (C) Fuad pointed to Mahmoud Othman, an independent Kurd in the Council of Representatives who has been very vocal about his belief that the White House statement did not say anything new, and that Barzani gave up seats in the CoR for nothing. Fuad said that Othman's distrust reflected the older generation of Kurds, historical memory of the U.S. "letting the Kurds down" at the time of the 1975 Algiers Accord and the failed uprising in 1991. This widespread Kurdish fear is why the KRG had gone public with SecDef Gates, comment during his recent visit that, "We will never abandon you." (Fuad said he had subsequently apologized to the Defense Department for the unauthorized public disclosure of comments made during Gates, December 11 meeting with Barzani.) Fuad Hussein said that he himself has publicly praised the White House statement, notably in an interview with Al Hurra during his Washington visit.

STRENGTHENING THE IKR'S TIES TO IRAQ; SHAWAYS TO BE DPM

16. (C) Regarding the statement's reference to Article 142 (which details how Iraq's constitution may be amended), Fuad said this was not requested by the Kurdish side but that the Kurds had no objection to it. Fuad and KRG Minister responsible for external relations Falah Mustafa were pleased with their meetings in Washington. Fuad said USG interlocutors had stressed that the U.S. long-term commitment to the KRG should be seen in the context of the KR being part of Iraq. He said the KRG has no problem with this. SANI said that if the U.S. long-term commitment is seen as undermining non-Kurds it will not be of service to the Kurds.

The U.S. relationship with the Kurds must be seen in conjunction with the unity of Iraq. Fuad agreed and said, "We are not talking about an independent state." He said the Kurds are not expecting the U.S. to shield them, just help find solutions. The KRG does not see the U.S. commitment as a commitment to "stand against others." SANI urged Kurdish leaders to engage more in Baghdad and to be seen to care about broader Iraq-wide issues. This would undermine the perception of Kurdish aloofness from Iraq. In this regard Fuad said that President Barzani had decided that Rowsch Shaways would soon be named to fill the Deputy PM position vacated by Barham Salih two months ago. (Comment: This is a positive move by Barzani ahead of his visit to Washington. Sunni Arab figures, and even some Kurdish observers, had cited the lack of prompt KRG action to replace Salih in Baghdad as evidence of KRG inattention to Iraq's national agenda. End Comment.)

17. (C) Barham Salih said that in this election season the U.S. will be tested, as everyone will push on the U.S. one way or another. He said that on his recent trip to Baghdad he became concerned about the high level of tension between the various Iraqi factions. He said that the atmosphere in Baghdad was poisonous and in that situation everyone needs to be concerned about security. When SANI said the December 7 White House statement was a reaffirmation of existing U.S. policy, Salih advised caution in any U.S. attempt to play down the significance of the statement, given the political context in the Kurdish community, including opposition criticism of Barzani's signing onto the election law. In particular, he stated that KRG President Masoud Barzani attached great importance to this U.S. expression of support for Article 140. SANI acknowledged that the statement was a good faith reiteration of U.S. support, but stressed that it should not be regarded as either a new direction in U.S. policy or as USG endorsement of any preconceived interpretation of how to implement article 140 of Iraq's constitution. Above all, it did not signify U.S. support for a simplistic "up-or-down" referendum to settle the status of Kirkuk. Salih asked if SANI had conveyed this clarification to Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament Speaker Kamal Kirkuki. SANI replied in the affirmative.

UPCOMING VISIT TO THE WHITE HOUSE

18. (C) Fuad outlined President Barzani's upcoming trip to Washington. The delegation consisting of President Barzani, Director of Intelligence Masrur Barzani, Falah Mustafa, Fuad Hussain, Nechirvan Barzani, and Board of Investment Director Herish Mohamed will aim to arrive in Washington D.C. either on or about the evening of January 23, or on the morning of Sunday, January 24. (Note: All except Mohamed are KDP. End note.) On January 25 and 26 they are planning a series of meetings organized by the KRG representative office with DC area think tanks, the NSC, the Kurdish community and the media. Fuad Hussain specifically mentioned that they would prefer that the Iraqi Ambassador to the U.S. not attend their official meetings, including those at the White House. Fuad said that while he is a friend of the Ambassador, the Ambassador now "thinks like an Arab" and wants Iraq to become a strong Arab country.

THE WAY FORWARD

19. (C) Fuad Hussain urged that there be some sort of structured follow-up to the December 7 White House statement, including defining the long-term commitment it embodied. Similarly, Salih said the U.S. needs to start acting on its commitment, and the U.S. and UN need to reinvigorate the process. Fuad said that he would like to see a joint committee formed to solve the problems of Kurds in Iraq. He said that he foresees that the joint committee would tackle political problems the way that the command centers under the Joint Security Architecture look at security concerns. SANI said that one lesson the U.S. learned from the election law negotiations was to take a position earlier in the process. Fuad said, "That's what we want." He (and Falah, separately) said that "compromise" in Arabic connotes "surrender" which is why a third party is needed. He said Kurds, too, had long rallied around the slogan "Kurdistan or nothing." But now Kurds have changed, under the influence of Kurds who had spent long periods in Europe. But Fuad said that Arabs tend to look down on Kurds, which makes bilateral negotiations difficult. He said that the joint committee would have to be made up of people with the power to make decisions, and that they should meet as frequently as every two months. SANI stated that the USG commitment to the Kurds, including the December 7 statement, is sincere and valid, and agreed that negotiation among the parties, rather than a once-and-for-all referendum, was the right approach to the DIBs challenge.

Barham Salih mentioned that after he finalizes the KRG budget this month, he will invite some Arabs and Turkomen from Kirkuk to the Kurdistan Region. He said that this is a follow-up to his own recent visit to Kirkuk.

110. (C) Toward the end of the meeting, Fuad Hussain went on at length about the importance of the Kurds to the establishment of a liberal democracy in Iraq, saying the experience of other Arab countries suggests that Iraqi Arabs will not create a democracy if left to themselves. The Kurds potential role as "king-makers" means the Kurds can help the U.S. to have a long-term relationship with Iraq. He touched upon the desire of the Kurds to have the U.S. sign a new security agreement with Iraq, saying he had heard this might be under consideration. He understood that no one could talk about this until after the election.

KIRKUK, CENSUS

111. (C) Fuad said that the Kurds needed to stress to other Iraqis that even if Kirkuk became part of Kurdistan, it is still part of Iraq. Later in the meeting, however, he said that to solve the Kirkuk issue, "we need to sit together." He emphasized the need for a census for multiple reasons: for economic and budgetary policy, and to eliminate problems such as the election law. Fuad was confident that Iraq does not

have 33 million people, as implied by the election law. He said the Kurds are not pushing for a census to prove they are the majority in Kirkuk or Khanaqin - they know it. SANI wondered whether the census could be done before the end of the slow but worthwhile UNAMI process. Fuad said that relatively less important problems should not be allowed to block progress on bigger issues, but acknowledged that the election and subsequent government formation process would make it hard for Iraq to manage a census during 2010.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: The difficult and protracted negotiation over Iraq's national election law ended in success for Iraq's fledgling democracy, but the parties are still coming to grips with the lessons of that experience. For the Kurds, the December 6 White House telephone calls were decisive in sealing the deal. However, the December 7 White House statement, in part because it was public and the calls private, received inordinate scrutiny "both in Kurdistan and in Baghdad" and was in some quarters over-interpreted as a new and specific U.S. commitment concerning the way ahead on DIBs issues. We have engaged with Kurdish interlocutors to put the picture back into proper focus, although some KRG officials cling to the misperception that the USG has now endorsed the "winner take all" referendum concept that many Kurds have traditionally read into Article 140. Barzani's impending visit to Washington affords an important opportunity to clarify Barzani's own understanding of U.S. policy on Article 140 and how best to approach the Arab-Kurdish dispute across the northern provinces.

HILL